

Sermon: Building a Good Foundation

6/14/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When the pandemic forced our church and so many businesses to close their doors, the expectation was that they would begin reopening in a month or two. At that point, so the thinking went, the disease would be under control and our lives would be returning to normal.

Technically, there was no promise, although politicians and news shows may have made it sound like a certainty. Then day after day passed, deadline after deadline passed, and the promise began to sound a bit hollow. What if that day will not arrive until a vaccine is developed, assuming one ever is, or herd immunity takes years to develop and untold more illnesses and deaths? Every day, it feels like we are hearing politicians and news shows tell us that our reopening is just around the corner; that we just need to wait a few more weeks or months and life can go back to normal, and it can be difficult not to be cynical and laugh. Because, as we all know, fool me once, shame on me, fool me twice...

That was how Sarah felt when she heard the three strangers speaking to Abraham. “They think that I am going to have a son,” she laughed to herself. “I am ninety years old, well past the age of childbirth, and Abraham is ten years older than me. Twenty-five years ago the Lord appeared to Abraham and told him that we should leave our country for another land, where God will make of us a great nation. That day, I believed that God would bless us with a son. But then day after day passed and deadline after deadline passed, and still no son. Fool me once, shame on me, fool me twice...”

That day, Sarah knew that she shouldn't have laughed, which is why she denied it when the three strangers—the three messengers sent by God—confronted her. But can you really

blame her? She was 90 years old and had been waiting for 25 years. I imagine I would have been cynical too. Perhaps, drawing strictly on today's Old Testament lesson, you may be tempted to think that Abraham would have been the last person to understand her laughter. After all, when he saw the three men, he immediately ran out and bowed down to the ground, and then offered them a meal of milk, cakes, and a just-slaughtered calf. While his wife was laughing, he was showing the messengers and their message the respect they deserved, a clear testament to his sure and abiding faith. Except that the Lord had made the exact same promise to Abraham one year earlier, and rather than express his thanks and praise, he quite literally "fell on his face" laughing. They both laughed, just at different times, because they both were not ready to believe what God was promising them.

Throughout the Old Testament, we hear God make many promises; promises like how God will deliver the Israelites from Egypt and lead them to the Promised Land, how God has set them apart and made them holy, and how God will send them a Messiah. The Israelites had no reason to laugh after all that God had done for them. And yet, time and time again, they disobeyed and disregarded God's commandments. They had been called to a better way, a way marked by love, mercy, and justice, a way that they repeatedly refused to follow. So God sent them the Messiah they had long been waiting for, and once again, they laughed. "You mean this poor son of a carpenter is the Messiah? Look at him," they snickered. "He refuses to even pick up a sword. No, there's no way that this man can be the Messiah, no matter what he says or does."

The Israelites should have believed. As we heard in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus had been traveling from city to city, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news, as well as curing every disease and illness. The miracles that he had performed were signs that he

was the Messiah and that his teachings were from God. They should have believed, just like Abraham and Sarah should have believed so long ago, but there was something holding them back. After all their unfaithfulness, I'm not sure that I would have blamed God if God had sent Jesus somewhere else right there and then, to another people who would follow God without laughing. Except that God refused to pack up and abandon them, because God will never abandon God's chosen people.

Amidst all the laughing, Jesus could see the truth. He could see that "the harvest is plentiful;" that there were numerous Israelites who were willing and ready to embrace the good news. Before they could do that, though, more laborers were needed. Not laborers like the Pharisees and Sadducees, the ones who were scorning and laughing at him the hardest. Rather, people of the earth, people like him, the son of a carpenter, people who were prepared to go out into the fields and reap the harvest, rain or shine, night and day. So that day he gathered together his first twelve field hands, the twelve disciples, and sent them out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and do not enter a Samaritan town. Instead, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, proclaim the good news, and perform miracles." That the disciples would be sent out to proclaim the good news and perform miracles is not surprising, but not to the Samaritans or any other Gentiles? Why didn't Jesus send them out to everyone? Because whenever you build a house, you need to begin with a good foundation.

The Israelites were and will always be God's chosen people. They will always hold a special place in God's heart. By the time Jesus arrived, God had already walked alongside them for centuries, guiding them, teaching them, and calling them back. So when the time came for Jesus to proclaim the good news, God turned to the people whom God knew best and who best knew God. Not because the Israelites were more deserving or because God loved the Gentiles

any less, but because of the powerful witnesses they would be. By witnessing to all that God had done, was doing in Jesus and in their lives, and would do through the Holy Spirit, the Israelites would be the foundation on which the good news would spread throughout the entire world. Is this call to be witnesses beginning to sound a bit familiar to anyone else?

We, as Christians, are called to be witnesses. We are called to go out and spread the good news, like the disciples so long ago. Not because we are more deserving or because God loves non-Christians any less, but because of all that God has done in our lives. Our testimonies serve as powerful witnesses to who God is and how much God loves us. And we don't need to do or be something special, like a pastor or missionary, to share them. Our Gospel lesson makes that clear. Our Gospel lesson makes clear that all we need to be are every-day people who are prepared and willing to go out into the fields and reap the harvest.

But, you might be thinking to yourself. I say "but" because it is the word that entered my mind. Spreading the good news sounds easy in the abstract, in a sermon. It is so much more difficult out there, in the midst of our day-to-day lives. How can God really expect for me to go out and do that? I mean, (begin laughing) just think, God wants me to go out and be like the disciples, to be a part of the very foundation of the church and its ministry. God can't be serious (laugh again).

At one moment or another, we have all laughed. We have all doubted God. That is what makes God's faithfulness all the more remarkable. Abraham and Sarah laughed, and yet God blessed them with a baby, Isaac, whose descendants would go on to make a great nation and bless the earth. Then the Israelites, Isaac's descendants, laughed each time they strayed from God and refused to follow God's commandments. But God did not abandon them and leave them to their laughter. Rather, God sent Jesus to show them the way, the truth, and the light, so that

they might be witnesses to world; witnesses upon which God built the foundation of the church.

We as Christians and the church stand in a long line of witnesses. When we laugh, may we seek forgiveness, and when God's promises seem too good to be true, may we thank God for all of the remarkable things that God has done in the past, all the remarkable things that God is doing in our lives, and all the remarkable things that God can and will do in the future. I'm ready to make that promise. Are you? Amen.